

June 23, 1952

A Spanish Cape

In a large glass case in the old Plaza Hotel in San Juan Bautista, there is displayed a handsome Spanish gentlemen's cape, which once was the property of the Larios family, long prominent in the annals of California history, especially around the old mission town, part of which is now a state monument.

Jose Maria Larios had come as a foot soldier from Mexico to San Jose. The family had originally come from Barcelona, Spain. Jose had two sons, Manuel and Justo. In 1839, Manuel Larios and a neighboring rancher, Juan Miguel Anzar, owner of the Aromas Ranch – both being in need of more pasture for their cattle – were given the Santa Ana Y Quien Sabe Ranch of 11 square leagues, according to an article written by Ralph L. Milliken published in the San Juan Mission News.

The Quien Sabe grant was beyond the present town of Hollister and was four leagues east of the mission. Here Don Manuel lived, with his ever increasing family until 18??, in a two story fortified adobe. Indian attacks were both numerous and fierce in those days, but they were never able to capture this stronghold of the Don Manuel Larios.

During all these years, Don Manuel was growing both in stature and as a leader among the Californians, as well as in worldly wealth. The San Antonio grant, adjoining the mission, he began calling the "Ranchito," meaning "the little ranch," and it was so known until comparatively recent times.

At Santa Ana, Don Manuel developed a large Hacienda. Besides shops for his blacksmithing, saddle making weaving and soap making, he built and furnished a ranch chapel dedicated to Santa Ana, his patron saint.

Don Manuel, like most other California land owners fared well from the gold rush. Cattle that had been worth only their hides and tallow, now sold for \$30 and \$40 apiece. Don Manuel, with his two ranches, and his large herd of cattle, suddenly found himself a very wealthy man. He enlarged his ranch house at the Ranchito to two stories and a score of rooms. Shortly thereafter he retired with his family and dependents from the Santa Ana ranch and spent the remaining of his days at San Juan Bautista.

Larios brought with him to San Juan his Indians from Santa Ana, provided them with houses, or had them live with him in his big two-story adobe. Every year on Santa Ana's Day, July 26, he gave a fiesta for all his relatives and friends. For three days bull fights went on during the day in the arena next to his home, while at night the time was spent in the candlelit Sala (living room) or great hall of his home, dancing to the music of guitars, flutes and violins. Guests came from Monterey and Santa Cruz to enjoy the Larios' hospitality.

In 1863 Don Manuel deeded a tract of land to the Baptist Church of San Juan Bautista for a Protestant cemetery. This is now the public cemetery belonging to the people of San Juan.

The following year, 1864, Don Manuel deeded an adjoining tract of land to Bishop Amat. The cemetery at the mission in use since 1797 was full to overflowing. The cemetery on the hillside is now the Catholic cemetery of San Juan. A tiny corner adjoining was reserved for a burial place for the members of the Larios family. It was here in the center of this tract of one-seventeenth of an acre, that Don Manuel was buried.

Mr. Milliken tells us that Senor Don Manuel Larios died December 11th, 1865. His funeral was the greatest that the mission town has ever known. All caskets in those days were home made and there were no handles. Don Manuel's casket rested on poles borne by six men walking three on a side. These were followed by six other men, who took turns bearing the casket up the long hill to the cemetery. The priest on foot led the procession, the mourners followed, two by two, each person carrying a lighted candle. When the procession ended at the cemetery the last of it had not yet left the mission.

Surviving Don Manuel was his third wife and his family of nine living children. He was known to the Americans at San Juan as the "King of the Dons. His grave remained unmarked for years and it was at the request of his youngest son Estolano, who died some years ago, that a tombstone has recently been arranged to be erected to the memory of this outstanding Californian of a century ago.